PRIVATE LETTER

Addressed To The

GENTLEMEN Of The ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

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A

PRIVATE LETTER,

ADDRESSED TO THE

Gentlemen of the Royal College of Surgeons,

BY

A FELLOW MEMBER.

Edinburgh, July 9. 1798.

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The requeſt, in anſwer to which the following ſhort note was written, is one of the many motives for calling the attention of the Members of the Royal College of Surgeons to the preſent condition of that Society, the Elections, Offices, Buſineſs, and Duties of it.

SIR,

HAVING firſt received a letter from you, requeſting my vote to make you Preſident of the Royal College of Surgeons, you afterwards, in the ſtreets, forced me into a converſation, which was, to ſay the leaſt of it, unneceſſary. On my part, that converſation conſiſted chiefly of one queſtion, viz. Whether you yourſelf had not promiſed to vote for Mr. ——? You ſaid you had; and your reſolution of keeping your word gives me ſuch a ſingular opinion of your honour and good ſenſe, that I cannot but vote along with you.—I am,

Your moſt obedient ſervant,

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SIR,

THE conſtitution of the Royal College of Surgeons gives to every Member high privileges in ſpeaking his ſentiments among his fellow Members; but this is a dead law. The buſineſs is uſually ſo formed by the official Members, that no man feels any peculiar call to do his duty; and his opinion degenerates into a ſilent vote, or unavailing proteſt. He is not encouraged to ſpeak his opinions; he is indifferent about buſineſs; which can do no honour nor ſervice to the Society;—its concerns roll on in one undiſtinguiſhed rotine; many Gentlemen have not condeſcended to appear at its meetings for years; and now, to the utter ſhame and diſgrace of the College, no one public duty occupies their thoughts, till that ſeaſon returns in which ſome ſingle Member is to puſh his way into the Council Chamber, for purpoſes which it were beſt, even among ourſelves, to leave unexplained.

When a Member of the College feels theſe things as he ſhould do, it is his privilege, and his bounden duty, to ſpeak his ſentiments in that form in which he thinks they will be moſt effectual; but he ſhould endeavour to do it with tenderneſs towards others, and under that reſtraint which becomes an individual Member, addreſſing himſelf to a public body, and to the Members of a public body. The perſon who now addreſſes you, feels that he acts honeſtly; proteſts himſelf purged of malice, free and honourable in his motives; with no little-minded private reſentment lurking about him; but with an honeſt and growing indignation at a public abuſe which has been increaſing upon us for years, and now knows no bounds.

It is the fate of every public body to ſtruggle, firſt for exiſtence, then for privileges, for honours, laſt of all, when in the end, it falls, like the natural body, into ſlow decay. Our College has been much honoured, and often;—it has had large privileges, renewed from time to time;—it was once a learned body, and publiſhed thoſe eſſays which have been ſo much admired abroad;—it was then ſtruggling for the higheſt privileges, and obtained them, and was elected into a Royal College;—but at the preſent time, though it has thoſe privileges entire within it, like the ſpirit of life, yet it hardly lives, but merely exiſts.

A long narration of this would ill ſuit the preſent purpoſe. The appeal is to thoſe who, being integral parts of this general body, feel, or need to feel, all the meanneſs of their ſituation: and, ungracious as the taſk may be, I wiſh to prove to you, and all my fellow Members, how ſhamefully low this College has fallen; for this evil, if fully and generally felt, could not be long endured.

We feel nothing intereſting or honourable in the buſineſs of this College, in the character which it confers on its Members, in the privileges which they enjoy, or in the uſe which is made of thoſe privileges. To be a Member of ſo old an inſtitution, ſo highly chartered—ſo reſpectable by its privileges, ſhould be an honour; but it is ſo fallen in reputation, that, bating the right of practiſing in this city, there is no one privilege which a ſenſible man would value. The money, time, and ſervices, by which thoſe privileges are procured, are a mere ſquandering of the beſt years of life.

This College, to which we belong, would very ill bear to be compared with the Great Schools of other Countries. Its name is not known abroad; or, if it is ſo, it is only by being confounded with the Univerſity; for what ſtranger could think that it were not a literary body, as our profeſſion is a learned one. Its examinings, and its five guinea diplomas, are matter of trivial form: as official paſſports, they have but limited effect. They have no currency—no reſpectability;—they are of no authority nor value;—they are acceſſible to all thoſe who cannot procure degrees, and are then their only refuge to ſatisfy their friends, like the parchments of private ſocieties.——Who cares for our diploma?—

The buſineſs of the College cannot intereſt a rational man, who is entering into life with ſerious thoughts. Its laws relate to fines and meetings—the diſtributing of worthleſs diplomas—the examining of the moſt ignorant young men, of whom no regular qualifications are required;—to the election of a Deacon, who goes to the Town Council but to be neglected; who, if he were truly choſen for his proper office, of Preſiding over a Royal College, over a ſociety of men bred up to ſcience, and thinking of their profeſſion alone, would feel himſelf but little connected with the Town Council, and not at all with politics; would go there ſeldom; and would be accordingly honoured. The buſineſs of the College is not paſſively deſpiſed, it is deteſted;—the place is forſaken;—its buſineſs is abandoned to thoſe few who need to hunt for ſome little office, or who have to run backwards and forwards, at the call of the whipper-in, and yelp in order to turn the game.—Who beſides minds the buſineſs to this Royal College?—Is this a fit or decent thing for men who belong to a ſerious profeſſion, and a learned one?

The offices of the College of Surgeons are ſuch as bring no honour. They are conſidered only as the means of procuring other offices out of the profeſſion—leſs honourable, but gainful; and yet it is ſtrange that ſuch mean offices ſhould be ſought after in this way:—for theſe offices muſt be filled up; without theſe ſneaking methods, each office muſt be given to ſome one; and it is only the intenſe deſire to procure them that hurries us into needleſs baſeneſs. But yet this is the pitiful motive for which an office, that of Preſident of the College of Surgeons, which ſhould be honourable, has been long diſgraced; and now, more than ever. Did no man propoſe himſelf for this office but with manly and reſpectful notions of what the College of Surgeons ſhould be, and with a due ſenſe of the value of his fellow Members, and of the dignity of the ſtation to which he aſpired. Thoſe high thoughts would make him worthy of the honour. But are thoſe, indeed, the motives? It were cruel to ſay of any individual that he did not ſolicit the office with ſuch honourable intentions, or were not fit for its duties;—but if the Members of the Royal College of Surgeons had that reſpect for themſelves, and for each other, which they ſhould have, no one would dare to offer himſelf who were not, in ſome degree, worthy. It were ſurely requiring no hard thing of every right minded man, that, laying his hand on his heart, he ſhould ſay, I believe the man for whom I vote to be worthy of this office;—I do not vote for him in conſideration of his

private intereſts, or peculiar ſituation ;—I ſupport him with no other thought than that he is to buſy himſelf in the intereſt and honour of this College, and in that alone. Do we now acknowledge that this would be honourable, ſtrictly honourable ? and yet it is not done ! ! !

Once we had a College, and Preſidents—and buſineſs, intereſting to every Member. Our College was aſſociated with phyſicians, for the purpoſe of publiſhing books of Science. Then character was equally divided in this commonwealth of knowledge, and the name of Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and eſpecially the title of Preſident, was honourable abroad; and, what is more difficult, more intereſting, was reſpected at home.—But now that collection of obſervation, which once was a chief buſineſs of the College, is neglected;—and though this work of our foreſathers has been infinitely approved of—which it is a laſting benefit to our profeſſion, and an honour to the College to which we belong, is a reproach to us.——Do our preſent Members think ſo meanly of themſelves ?—or are they inſenſible to ſuch duties, and to ſuch honours ?

There is no public buſineſs, nor any motive for aſſembling in the Hall. There is no private harmony—no means of cultivating a good underſtanding one with another ; but we feel as if ſome ſpirit were working among us to divide us into abſurd parties, without apology or motive, or with ſuch motives only as a ſenſible man would bluſh to own.

There was indeed a time when every ſocial meeting, was accompanied with thoſe loathſome exceſſes which could not long have been endured, which are, in our profeſſion, particularly diſgraceful. But thoſe diſorders had abſolutely ceaſed, when they were made an awkward pretence for aboliſhing every public meeting ;—yet thoſe who propoſed that ſuch ſocial meetings ſhould be diſſolved, were by no means remarkable for their chaſteneſs of conduct, nor the moſt backward at thoſe ſeaſons of revelry and riot ; nor the moſt earneſt for moral reform. The true reaſon lies much deeper than this. Thoſe ſhameful exceſſes had well nigh ceaſed. The College meetings were ſubſiding into a more gentleman-like form ; points of profeſſional knowledge were aſſuming the place of political cabals. Young men were daily admitted ;—it ſeemed poſſible that the Society might change its complexion altogether, and reform from other follies than the pardonable levities of any occaſional debauch ;—it looked as if the Members were amalgamating and running together into ſome new ſhape. The general Society began to be weary of thoſe politics, and of that eternal irritation, which was profitable to a few only. It was found that votes and promiſes could be more eaſily bargained for—bartered—and interchanged in ſtreets and corners, than in general meetings ;—and it was plainly perceived, that, ſhould the College of Surgeons become one united and reſpectable body ; ſhould it become a Society of induſtrious men, eſpecially of young men ; and, moſt of all, of young men aſpiring to any character of knowledge in their profeſſion, the College would put away all this idle buſineſs ;—it could no longer endure thoſe trifles which had hitherto been its ſole and conſtant occupations ;—it would no longer be ſteared through all the wiles of politics, by a Deacon and his Council. The concluſion was obvious, and much to be feared. It was thought eaſier to pick up the ſcattered particles than to move the congregated maſs ; and, for this worthy cauſe, the College was ſcattered like chaff ;—all means of diſunion were provided ;—all attempts at reunion were obſerved with a very jealous eye ; and the ſucceſſive propoſals of eſtabliſhing a uſeful and improving Society out of thoſe among the younger Members who wiſhed to be uſefully and honeſtly employed, has been ſo managed in the Deacon's Council as to ſhow plainly that politics and ſcience have no natural connection.

I make it my duty to ſpeak thus plainly my ſenſe of what I have ſeen, and of the tendency of it; for this ſyſtem has grown into ſuch a flagrant enormity, that now the College of Surgeons has degenerated into a ſet of politicians, not of the moſt exalted rank; and every ſucceeding abuſe has its particular end, and every movement explains what is deſigned. I think almoſt a man might forſake his profeſſion, and ſtill retain influence enough to ſtruggle againſt a whole ſet of young men zealous and earneſt to do well!!!

No one among us can be ignorant from what motives it is that men have ſought to be placed in the chair of the Royal College of Surgeons. Their abilities to fulfil an honourable charge;—their deſire to acquit themſelves well;—their reſpectability in their profeſſion;—their long ſtanding, or repute, never enter into their own minds;—no anxieties of this kind trouble the electors or the elected; it is to procure an office that they are elected; and, when they are elected, their object is almoſt enſured. For thoſe who need or deſire ſuch appointments, he muſt be an ill hearted man who does not feel ſome concern and ſympathy, according to his degree of connection and intimacy; but he ſhould feel himſelf infinitely degraded in ſhowing his friendſhip in this way. Let us choke up this thoroughfare to politics through ſacred ground; for while objects ſo tempting are in view, men will not be reſtrained. It is eaſy to perceive how the beſt and moſt induſtrious of our profeſſion may be ſeduced by this rage like gaming, which abſorbs all other thought, and diſdains no means of acquiring its object. Often, in the entering into the world, a young perſon is like one "ſtruggling for life among the waters," and feels thoſe labours and hardſhips, thoſe diſappointments and neceſſities, which drive a thinking man almoſt to deſpair; without blame he is eaſily ſeduced from his profeſſion; he is anxious to make proviſion for thoſe depending on him the eaſieſt and ſhorteſt way, and is induced to go after expectations far different from thoſe which animated him in the firſt proud outſet of life, when he thought he had made choice of that profeſſion in which he could delight to work his way to a reſpectable ſtation with pleaſant labour.

The man who does this may be pitied, but cannot be blamed. Should a private individual ſee the companion of his early days abandon his profeſſion, and break all thoſe expectations which made a part, as it were, of their mutual friendſhip, and make himſelf wretchedly dependent on chances which no man can controul, and the ſlave of others, what would he feel? Could he approve of this? Would he not be ſenſible that his friend was loſt to himſelf and to the world? And if a private friend ſhould thus lament a man of abilities in his profeſſion abandoning himſelf to ſuch objects, ſhould a College encourage this temper, or tempt its Members by bribes, or ſuffer them to abandon or neglect their profeſſion, which it is the very eſſence of the inſtitution to ſupport? When once ſuch motives and objects generally prevail, and are conſidered as the direct or indirect motive of every connection among our fellow Members, they abſorb every honeſt or induſtrious thought in the vortex of jealous and uneaſy paſſions; and the buſineſs of the College, its offices, its public meetings, its annual elections, are all turned to this one point. A man ſhall pretend to ſolicit the chair of the Royal College of Surgeons from the moſt honourable motives—ſhall cheat his fellow Members with promiſes of reform—and yet ſhall neglect all thoſe meaſures which might put ſcience in motion, enſure improvement, raiſe the Society from its preſent meanneſs, and give to each individual Member his ſhare of reputation—ſhall think of nothing but how to ſtick up, in the place which he muſt appear to leave, an image which will move when he draws the ſtrings—of the pretty puppet!

Thus it is that our diſhonour is perpetuated; that the Preſident of the Royal College, and,

by implication, every Member of it, becomes a ſuitor for ſome deſpicable poſt, and even in the Town Council is deſpiſed, but ſtill muſt be gratified—becauſe he has been made Convener—has got the command of his fellow Deacons—has drunk them into good humour with himſelf, and ill humour with the Town Council—has procured another ſet of votes—has eſtabliſhed a ſecond cabal; and, in ſhort, has inoculated another public body with that venomous infection which he has carried out of his own. To be plain, the College of Surgeons *does gamble with its votes for places and penſions ſuch as they are.* Their Preſident is as a conſul to negotiate the trade for himſelf or his friends, and Deacon after Deacon labours in the filthy craft without ſhame.

But, Sir, the open diſgrace is nothing, compared with the inward unhappineſs which prevails among us.—There is no chance of harmony or friendſhip among a public body, unleſs they are open, generous, and honeſt with each other, employed about ſome public and reſponſible buſineſs, and with no thoughts which they may not eaſily diſcloſe.—But, with us, no one knows what another is doing.—He looks in another's face, and ſees that he has been tampered with; he ſees counſels and whiſperings in ſtairs and paſſages;—each is vexed with ſolicitations—jealouſies foreign to his own honeſt thoughts are cunningly infuſed into his mind; he is irritated and ſtirred up againſt ſome particular perſon.—He is his enemy before he knows.—Other reaſons are acknowledged for liking or diſliking, than thoſe which ariſe from the mere intercourſe of gentlemen one with another.

Is not this the pure ſpirit of party?—Has not the deſigning ſecrecy of theſe cabals an ill influence on the minds and manners of men?—Let me aſk you, Sir, as a Member of this College, Has a man leave to be neutral?—Has he leave to indulge the natural bent of his diſpoſition?—Does he not ſee every moment men divided from him, almoſt without a motive, with whom he had expected to live in conſtant and uſeful friendſhip?—It has really come to paſs, as Voltaire ſays, "That one muſt either be hammer or anvil."—He has no choice.—This ſpirit of party interrupts all friendſhip, but I hope not permanently—is deadly to every principle of honour.—Accuſtomed to dabbling in the Town Council for poſts, our Members learn to call it politics; and, having profeſſed themſelves politicians, they aſſume, along with the title, all the privileges of politicians—reſtleſſneſs—neglect of their proper duties,—enmity without a cauſe, and breach of faith without a motive;—till, at laſt, every thing diſhoneſt ceaſes to be diſhonourable;—and *divide and govern* is no doubt among the maxims which ſome aſſume as part of this broad charter, which confers on our little doings the title, the privileges, and apologies, and all the dignified villanies of high politics.—One ſolicits a vote to eſtabliſh a friend in the Preſident's chair—that that friend may aſſiſt another friend to make votes in the Town Council—to procure a place which he has ſolicited for five years—For they are building a houſe of correction—and it will be ſoon built—and perhaps people will be put into it—and perhaps it will need a Surgeon,—and probably the Deacon of the year will be made Surgeon,—and very likely the ſalary that ſhall be aſſigned him will bear ſome ſort of proportion to the ſteadineſs of his influence; and perhaps though he is elected this year, and has got the place, if he be not Deacon next year he may have no ſalary at all, and ſo get the diſh which Grumio propoſes to his termagant miſtreſs, "Now, good ſweet lady, what would you think of the muſtard without "the meat." This is the prieſt all ſhaven and ſhorn,—that loved the maiden all forlorn,—that *MILKED the COW with* the *CROOKED HORN*,—that toſſed the dog,—that worried the cat,—that killed the rat,—that eat the malt,—that lay in the houſe that *JACK BUILT*.————

Theſe are the purpoſes, Sir, for which you and I and all of us are kept in perpetual torment, till ſome among us have as fairly forgotten what a vote or a promiſe means, as they have the ten commandments. Every thing diſhoneſt ceaſes to be diſhonourable, and all becauſe it is called politics, till at laſt a perſon, either from making too nice diſtinctions, or too coarſe diſtinctions, or from making no diſtinctions at all, promiſes a gentleman his vote to make him Preſident of the College of Surgeons, as if he wiſhed him ſucceſs, and then propoſes himſelf as a candidate, as if again he were ſo ABSURD as to wiſh himſelf ſucceſs, and then he promiſes to keep his word and his HONOUR, as if he meant that both ſhould ſucceed, and ſo he pulls with the left hand, and draws with the right. "Then be theſe juggling friends no more believed that paulter with us in a "double ſenſe; that keep the word of promiſe to our ear, and break it to our hope.—I'LL NOT "FIGHT WITH THEE."

But there is perhaps another intereſt working againſt all improvement, and it is the fancied ſuperiority of certain gentlemen, who yet are prudent enough to ſecure that ſuperiority by other means than a fair pre-eminence in knowledge. They are fearful of every young man,—jealous of every approach,—their diſtinction would be infinitely leſſened if they were ſurrounded by young people whoſe individual eſſays might compoſe a reſpectable volume. This is not generous, perhaps, but it is ſurely true. It is not my own obſervations only, it was the obſervation of other ſenſible men who felt it ſorely. It has been ſaid, that there are men againſt whom you can commit no higher offence, than to ſhow any anxiety that your profeſſion ſhould be generally improved: The leaſt movement or tendency that way excites a jealouſy and reſiſtance, as if the ſtruggle were for life and being. If this College were but what it ſhould be, no one would dare to ſhow even a lukewarm temper towards ſo high an intereſt, or, if he ſhould dare to interrupt ſuch uſeful deſigns, would be branded with the name of traitor to that ſcience which he was ſworn to promote.

I would have the College of Surgeons look well to its reſpectability and good name, and let no individual Member ſay it is none of my concern.—We feel, indeed, little connection with this public body, becauſe we have no common intereſt in it—we have no honour in being common Members of it; the inſtitution has been thoroughly degraded. But if it could be raiſed to a reſpectable ſtation among Colleges, or if it ſhould fall yet a little lower than we ſhould indeed feel, how much we are individualy affected by its ſtate. Our profeſſion ſtands on the difficult ground of public opinion, and in a public body the conduct of Members is more obſerved than they are apt to believe, and it forms a part of their general character—ours is a public profeſſion and a buſy one, every man's way of purſuing his profeſſion is perfectly known, and that public which ſeems to think ſo little, and yet judges ſo truly, gives to every one his due reward.

It were well if the College of Surgeons, in place of ſtriving to debaſe itſelf every day more and more, in place of buſying itſelf in behalf of a few, not the moſt reſpectable of its Members, in cabals and ſolicitations for petty offices, were to employ itſelf in matters which might make the preſent Members reſpectable; and in ſettling a ſyſtem of education in a Univerſity where every kind of education can be procured, ſuch as would enſure a ſucceſſion of valuable Members who might maintain the reſpectability of the College and the honour of a profeſſion which needs continually to be ſupported; for it ſtands upon the difficult ground of opinion, and by a very little miſconduct, all that makes it reſpectable, honourable, or uſeful, might go to wreck. We muſt be ſerious when ſerious matters are concerned.

You cannot be inſenſible of the ſtrong reaſons a Member has for putting his thoughts toge-

ther in this haſty way; and you muſt have had ſome uneaſy feelings on that occaſion whether you have been buſied in conducting a matter which you have no reaſon to be proud of; or whether you are ſubmitting yourſelf, on the other hand, compoſedly and quietly to what you muſt conſider as no ſmall diſgrace; whatever your connections in politics or in friendſhip are, I hope and truſt you will feel for a moment the neceſſity of laying aſide all ſuch partial conſiderations, will come to the meetings of the College prepared with the honeſt feelings of an independent man, anxious for his profeſſion, ſenſible of the mean condition into which the Royal College of Surgeons has fallen, and ready to act a generous, open, and manly part in that College.

It is as a fellow Member that I addreſs you; and if the Society were what it ſhould be, that would be a title of ſome import, expreſſing ſome degree of eſteem and friendſhip—ſome fellowſhip in occupation and intention—ſome privileges would be annexed to that name, which at this time we cannot boaſt of, it ſhould at leaſt imply that I meant very ſincerely; and yet, when a private Member addreſſes a public body, he cannot be without anxiety; nor reſolve upon ſo bold a meaſure, with urgent motives, and long delay. The very firſt ſtep he moves, he will feel all the delicacy of his ſituation; he will really feel himſelf performing a ſerious duty which nothing but a high ſenſe of its importance can enable him to fulfil. He cannot ſuppoſe his private thoughts to have much influence unleſs they have been anticipated by his fellow Members. He cannot ſuppoſe the name of any individual to have the ſmalleſt influence in enforcing thoſe ſentiments; fortunately the ſubject reſts leſs on authority than on common ſenſe and ſound judgment in the ordinary affairs of life; but in a caſe where ſome may chooſe to ſuppoſe themſelves offended, it is not fit that any man ſhould have leave to ſay, that by withholding his name, the writer of this letter means that it ſhould be concealed; it never ſhall be withheld on any urgent occaſion; and on an occaſion ſo full of improprieties on the ſide of thoſe whoſe conduct he condemns, he will be rather proud of any enmities he may entail upon himſelf from performing a duty ſo neceſſary, and but too long delayed; ſuch duties are more honourably diſcharged in any open and public manner, than in thoſe private converſations which are ſo liable to be miſrepreſented, and which cannot in our divided ſtate be always excluſively in the preſence of ſincere friends. If I ſhould have the happineſs to find that theſe ſentiments are in uniſon with thoſe of the more reſpectable and independent of my fellow Members, I ſhall come forward and call a meeting of the College, and propoſe ſuch laws as may perhaps render the whole College completely independent. Without this encouragement, it were preſumption for any individual to move. But whatever you, as an individual, may reſolve in the preſent diſorderly ſtate of our Society, I beſeech you to begin, before it be too late, to regard yourſelf more, and to think yourſelf more highly connected with a Society which you might help to re-eſtabliſh, whoſe re-eſtabliſhment would reflect honour on each of us,—which was once reſpectable;—which might be ſo eaſily reſtored;—whoſe privileges we have bought ſo dear, whoſe functions we ſhould not ſuffer to be thus diſgraced.

A FELLOW MEMBER.